

## CLAIMS

We claim:

1                   1. A method for distributing purchasing incentives to retail customers,  
2 comprising the following steps performed at a central site in cooperation with a  
3 communication device at a customer site:

4                   logging in a remotely located customer using identity data and region data  
5 transmitted by the customer over a communication network;

6                   transmitting over the communication network a plurality of incentive  
7 offers to the registered customer, the incentive offers being exercisable in the customer's  
8 region;

9                   receiving incentive offer selection data from the customer over the  
10 communication network, the offer selection data including the designation of a retailer  
11 at which selected offer or offers may be exercised;

12                  generating a purchasing incentive containing in encoded form the identity  
13 of the retailer designated by the customer and the identity of the customer; and

14                  transmitting at least one incentive to the customer over the communication  
15 network, wherein the transmitted incentive is encoded with the identity of the retailer  
16 selected by the customer.

1                   2. A method as defined in claim 1, and further comprising the step of:  
2                   communicating with the customer concerning the use of other shopping  
3 aids.

1                   3. A method as defined in claim 2, wherein the step of communicating  
2 with the customer includes:

3                   transmitting a list of products available for purchase;

4                   receiving customer selections from the list of products; and

5                   transmitting a shopping list to the customer.

1                   4. A method as defined in claim 2, wherein the step of communicating  
2 with the customer includes:

3                   transmitting a list of recipes to the customer;  
4                   receiving customer selection of one or more recipes;  
5                   transmitting back to the customer a shopping list that includes ingredient  
6 products needed in each selected recipe; and  
7                   transmitting to the customer at least one purchase incentive pertaining to  
8 an ingredient product used in a selected recipe.

1                   5. A method as defined in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the  
2 step of transmitting a plurality of incentive offers includes transmitting incentive offers  
3 from specific product manufacturers.

1                   6. A method as defined in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the  
2 step of transmitting a plurality of incentive offers includes transmitting incentive offers  
3 from specific retailers.

1                   7. A method as defined in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the  
2 step of generating a purchase incentive includes:

3                   converting textual and numeric information provided by the customer to  
4 graphical form;  
5                   converting other textual and numeric information to graphical form; and  
6                   merging the converted information with other graphical information  
7 defining the incentive, to form a composite graphical incentive image for transmission  
8 to the customer.

1                   8. A method as defined in claim 7, wherein the step of generating a  
2 purchase incentive further includes:

3                   generating a complex graphical background pattern for the incentive  
4 image; and

merging the background information with the textual, numeric and other graphical information in the incentive image.

9. A method as defined in any one of the preceding claims, wherein the step of transmitting at least one incentive includes:

transmitting only an advisory message to the customer; and

transmitting the terms of the incentive directly to the retail store selected by the customer, for use by the customer on a subsequent visit to the store.

10. A method as defined in any one of the preceding claim, wherein the step of transmitting at least one incentive includes:

transmitting only an incentive token to the customer; and

transmitting the terms of the incentive directly to the retail store selected by the customer, for use by the customer, who brings the token to the store on a subsequent visit.

11. A method for distributing purchasing incentives and other shopping aids to customers over a communication network, the method comprising the steps of:

logging in as a customer by providing at least an individual identification, a postal region code, and retail store selection;

transmitting from a central site and receiving at a remote customer site, a plurality of incentive offers, each of which is exercisable only in the customer's postal region;

selecting at the customer site one or more of the incentive offers and transmitting these selections back to the central site;

generating at least one purchasing incentive containing in encoded form the identity of the retail store selected by the customer and the identity of the customer; and

transmitting the at least one incentive to the customer.

1                   12. A method as defined in claim 11, and further comprising:  
2                   in response to a customer's action, transmitting a shopping list to the  
3                   customer for selection of products;  
4                   receiving the customer's selection of products on the shopping list; and  
5                   transmitting a customer-specific shopping list to the customer as a  
6                   shopping aid.

1                   13. A method as defined in claims 11 or 12, and further comprising:  
2                   in response to a customer's action, transmitting a recipe list to the  
3                   customer for possible selection of a recipe;  
4                   receiving the customer's selection of one or more recipes; and  
5                   transmitting a complete recipe to the customer, including a list of  
6                   ingredients, and transmitting any purchasing incentives tied to ingredients of the recipe.

1                   14. A method as defined in any one of claims 11 through 13, wherein the  
2                   step of transmitting a plurality of incentive offers includes:  
3                   transmitting one set of incentive offers originating from product  
4                   manufacturers; and  
5                   transmitting another set of incentive offers originating from product  
6                   retailers.

1                   15. A system for distributing purchasing incentives to retail customers,  
2                   comprising:  
3                   a communication network establishing two-way communication between  
4                   a central site and each of a plurality of customer devices;  
5                   a file at the central site containing a plurality of incentive offers;  
6                   a computer located at the central site, the computer including  
7                   means for storing customer information at the central site, based  
8                   on information transmitted from any of the customer devices to the central  
9                   site computer, over the communication network, the customer information

10 including geographical region data and identification data;  
11 means for retrieving incentive offers from the file of incentive  
12 offers, based on the customer's geographical region, and transmitting the  
13 retrieved offers to the customer over the communication network;  
14 means for receiving customer selections made from the incentive  
15 offers transmitted to the customer, and for receiving a customer designation  
16 of a retailer at which the selected incentives are to be exercised;  
17 means for generating at least one purchasing incentive containing  
18 in encoded form the identity of the retailer designated by the customer  
19 and the identity of the customer; and  
20 means for transmitting the generated purchasing incentive to the  
21 customer over the communication network.

1 16. A system as defined in claim 15, wherein:  
2 the system further comprises another file at the central site containing a  
3 list of products available for purchase; and  
4 the computer at the central site further includes means, responsive to a  
5 customer request, for transmitting the list of products to the customer, receiving  
6 customer selections from the list, and transmitting a shopping list back to the customer.

1 17. A system as defined in claims 15 or 16, wherein:  
2 the system further comprises another file at the central site containing a  
3 list of recipes available for customer use; and  
4 the computer at the central site further includes means, responsive to a  
5 customer request, for transmitting the list of recipes to the customer, receiving customer  
6 selections from the list, and transmitting complete recipes back to the customer, together  
7 with an ingredients shopping list and any associated purchasing incentives.

1 18. A system as defined in any one of claims 15 through 17, wherein the  
2 means for retrieving incentive offers and transmitting them to the customer includes:

3                   a manufacturer offer file containing purchasing incentive offers currently  
4 proposed by manufacturers of products for sale to customers.

1                   19. A system as defined in any one of claims 15 through 18, wherein the  
2 means for retrieving incentive offers and transmitting them to the customer includes:

3                   a retailer offer file containing purchasing incentive offers currently  
4 proposed by retailers of products for sale to customers.

1                   20. A system as defined in any one of claims 15 through 19, wherein:  
2                   the generated purchasing incentive is transmitted to the customer in the  
3 form of an advisory message only; and

4                   the computer further includes means for transmitting the terms of a  
5 purchasing incentive directly to the retail store designated by the customer, who may  
6 then exercise the incentive upon visiting the designated store.

1                   21. A system as defined in any one of claims 15 through 19, wherein:  
2                   the generated purchasing incentive is transmitted to the customer in the  
3 form of an encoded token only; and

4                   the computer further includes means for transmitting the terms of the  
5 purchasing incentive directly to the retail store designated by the customer, who may  
6 then exercise the incentive upon visiting the designated store.

1                   22. A system as defined in any one of claims 15 through 21, wherein:  
2                   the computer located at the central site further includes means for storing  
3 a customer identification (ID), volunteered by the customer and used in prior purchases  
4 by the customer; and  
5                   the means for generating at least one purchasing incentive includes means  
6 for generating a purchasing incentive based on the customer's prior purchasing behavior.

1                   23. A method for distributing purchasing incentives and other shopping

aids to customers over a communication network, the method comprising the steps of:  
logging in as a customer by providing at least a customer id. used by the customer in purchase transactions a retail store, and a customer postal region;  
transmitting from a central site and receiving at a remote customer site, a plurality of incentive offers, each of which is exercisable based on the customer's postal region, at least one of the offers being based on the customer's prior shopping behavior as determined from the customer id.;  
selecting at the customer site one or more of the incentive offers and transmitting these selections back to the central site;  
generating at least one purchasing incentive selected by the customer; and  
transmitting the at least one incentive to the customer.

24. A method for distributing purchasing incentives to retail customers, comprising the steps of:

maintaining a consumer purchase history database derived in part from accumulated purchase data of identifiable consumers;

maintaining a consumer database that identifies consumers by their electronic addresses;

generating purchase incentives for selected consumers; and

transmitting the purchase incentives to the selected consumers by electronic mail.

25. A method as defined in claim 24, wherein:

the step of maintaining the consumer database includes obtaining registration information from each consumer who logs in to a communications system information site, and transferring electronic mail information to the consumer database.

26. A method as defined in claims 24 or 25, and further comprising the step of:

selecting consumers to receive at least one purchase incentive on the basis

4 of demographic data stored in the consumer database.

1 27. A method as defined in claims 24 or 25, and further comprising the  
2 step of:

3 selecting consumers to receive at least one purchase incentive on the basis  
4 of non-demographic factors such as frequency of usage of coupons and frequency of  
5 usage of the online system.

1 28. A method for distributing purchasing incentives to retail customers,  
2 comprising the steps of:

3 maintaining a consumer purchase history database derived in part from  
4 accumulated purchase data of identifiable consumers;

5 obtaining personal information from a consumer;

6 establishing a personal page in a computer network, for any consumer who  
7 requests one, based in part on the personal information obtained from the consumer,  
8 wherein the personal page contains information about incentives directed specifically to  
9 the consumer associated with the page;

10 maintaining a consumer personal database for each consumer having a  
11 personal page, to store information contained in the personal page of the consumer;

12 generating purchase incentives for the consumer based in part on prior  
13 purchasing behavior and on personal information known from the consumer's personal  
14 database;

15 updating the personal page to include the generated purchase incentives;  
16 and

17 transmitting an advisory message to the consumer concerning the updated  
18 personal page.

1 29. A method for distributing purchasing incentives to retail customers,  
2 comprising the steps of:

3 transmitting promotional materials pertaining to product discounts, to a

4 consumer's remote terminal;

5 displaying the promotional materials pertaining to product discounts at the  
6 consumer's remote terminal;

7 receiving consumer selections of product discounts, made at the  
8 consumer's remote terminal;

9 in response to the consumer selections, generating a token and transmitting  
10 it to the consumer's remote terminal, wherein the token identifies the consumer as one  
11 who has made online discounted product selections;

12 scanning the token in a retail store, together with items purchased by the  
13 consumer;

14 verifying that the discounted items selected by the consumer at the  
15 consumer's remote terminal were purchased by the consumer; and

16 generating a voucher that provides a cash discount to the consumer, the  
17 cash discount being the total of all verified item discounts selected by the consumer.

1 30. A method as defined in claim 29, wherein:

2 the step of generating a voucher generates an instantly redeemable  
3 voucher.

1 31. A method as defined in claim 29, wherein:

2 the step of generating a voucher generates a voucher that is redeemable  
3 on a subsequent store visit.